



The power of words

I'm a writer. I know this. Short words shock. They grab attention.

If your house was on fire would you shout"A combustible material has been ignited in my near vicinity and appears to be out of control" or would you just shout... "FIRE!!!!" at the top of your lungs, before they filled with smoke and you died?

Some words in particular are words we can never hide from and shouldn't. They give us a very graphic and clear picture in our minds of an act in the most basic and unambiguous way. They grab at our hair and yank us upwards shuddering in horror. They drive a keen knife through our hearts and twist.

One of the most powerful of these words is "rape".

Well. It is if you are a woman. Because whilst you can challenge most of the poor behavior of men, rape is the one thing we fear most days of most weeks of most years. Until we die. It loiters on streets. The fear of it hangs around our every encounter with men. It escalates in conflict. It is a controlling mechanism in abusive relationships. It features heavily in porn. It is not out of bounds as a source of comedy to some vile men who call themselves funny. It is the thing that makes us want to keep our daughters in their rooms. Safe. Safe from men and boys who are rapists.

The Oxford dictionary definition is thus....

"The crime, typically committed by a man, of forcing another person to have sexual intercourse with the offender against their will."

or this....

"The wanton destruction or spoiling of a place."

Both of those definitions are very clear about what is happening and yet the word "rape" has a very special horror and impact. It has throughout history. Because men have always raped women. It has always been the worst thing, other than killing them, that a man can do to a woman.

So this morning, a man, Oliver Wright, writing in The Independent, has decided to take away the word. Just erase it. Just take away its power to shock and appall and name and blame and shame and object and scream against.

Well, Mr Wright. How can I put this in a terminology you might like? How can I put a sugar coating on this and dress it up in feathery vocab so that you might not be offended by it?

Turns out I can't. So here in all it's naked offensiveness is a great big "Fuck Off!"



Mr Wright thinks he is having a "radical" moment ..

"There are very few more unpleasant crimes than that of rape.....

But perhaps the time has come for policymakers to take a much more radical and controversial approach: abolish the terminology of "rape" in the criminal-justice system altogether.

Now before you stop reading in disgust, hear me out.....

And there is a possibility that the words "rape" and "rapist" alone could be contributing to our failure to succeed in this.

But a simpler and arguably more effective approach might be to replace the term "rape" with the term "non-consensual sex" across the board.

And a thousand feminists joined in a chorus of "The man said WHAT NOW?"

The problem with convicting men is a WORD? A word they don't like? A word juries don't understand? A word that raped women don't "understand"?

Mr Wright.... did you knock your keyboard on the floor, reach down and bang your head on the desk on the way back up, and then just hurl your fingers at the keyboard for an hour?

Because I can see why you would anticipate that we would turn away in disgust. It's because the suggestion is disgusting. Taking away the power of the description of one of the vilest acts imaginable - vile - not unpleasant - is just unfathomable.

And why? Why would this be useful?

Because "non-consensual sex" makes it a bit fluffier for a jury? Well then educate the bloody jurors.

Because "non-consensual sex" is less difficult for rapists to bear in later life? They might not feel so bad about their..... RAVING!

Well, educate young boys not to RAPE then. Punish men who didn't learn that lesson by saying - you are a RAPIST. You need removing from a society where you have RAPED.

When you are ready to face the fact that you did RAPE a woman, then you can rejoin society and forever be called a RAPIST because your crime was so vile that it will stick to your back forever like a sweaty shirt.

Can you see the power of the word Mr Wright? Can you see what it does? Short, simple, and absolutely horrific. Like the crime.

You cannot erase a crime by erasing the word. You cannot erase the horror for the victims of



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that crime by putting some gentler words around it. There really is no magic vocabulary blanket you can place around a victim and make the act more "pleasant".

What you can do is put a great big stamp on the criminal that marks them out for the rest of their life and takes away their ability to walk amongst us feeling like it was just another "type" of sex.